

SOME NOTES

ON THE

BOOK OF PSALMS

J. A. CROSS.

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ON THE
BOOK OF PSALMS.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

INTRODUCTORY HINTS
TO
ENGLISH READERS OF THE
OLD TESTAMENT.

LONDON: LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.

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BY

THE REV. JOHN A. CROSS, M.A.,

LONDON:

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO., PATERNOSTER-ROW.

1884.

DUBLIN :
PRINTED AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS,
BY PONSONBY AND WELDRICK.

P R E F A C E .

THE contents of this Volume are partly new, and partly reprinted from the larger volume, *Introductory Hints to English Readers of the Old Testament* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1882). They are issued in this form in the hope that they may be a help to some persons to appreciate some aspects of a Book which occupies so large a place in the public services of the Church, as well as in the private devotions of individual Christians.

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SOME NOTES
ON
THE BOOK OF PSALMS.

I.

Hebrew Poetry.

THE reader must not expect to find in the Hebrew poems either the rhymes or accents of English poetry, or the classical metres. Nothing like any of these is to be found either in the Hebrew original or in the authorized English translation.¹ English readers are sometimes apt to think that we cannot have poetry without rhyme, or at least without metre, because they become accustomed to one or both of these in the poems with which they first make acquaintance. But this is a mistake. The use of any peculiar form or mode of expression is not essential to poetry. The essence of poetry consists in the spirit by which it is

¹ Instances are sometimes found of *assonance*, that is, the concurrence of words resembling each other in sound. But this occurs only occasionally, as it may occur in oratorical prose, and cannot be considered a general characteristic of Hebrew poetry.

animated. At the same time, it is usual for poetry in all languages to assume some special form of its own, by which it is distinguished from prose, and by which its effect upon the mind is assisted. In Hebrew poetry there is such a form, though it is not like any to which we have become accustomed elsewhere. It consists in parallelism, that is, the repetition of the same or similar sentiments in sentences which also correspond more or less with each other in construction. Something like this is occasionally to be found in English poetry, as, for instance, in the following verses:—

‘When the dark waves round us roll,
And we look in vain for aid,
Speak, Lord, to the trembling soul,
“It is I; be not afraid.”

When our brightest hopes depart,
When our fairest visions fade,
Whisper to the fainting heart,
“It is I; be not afraid.”’

Here it will be noticed that there is a close correspondence between the two lines of each couplet. This correspondence depends on the resemblance or other relation between the thoughts expressed in the lines; and in the third couplet,

‘When our brightest hopes depart,
When our fairest visions fade,’

it amounts to an actual repetition of the same thought in two sentences of the same construction, and almost in the same words. Many of the parallelisms in Hebrew

poetry are equally distinct and complete. The second Psalm, for instance, begins thus :—

‘Why do the heathen so furiously rage together :
 And why do the people imagine a vain thing ?
 The kings of the earth stand up,
 And the rulers take counsel together :
 Against the Lord,
 And against his Anointed.’

Take another example from Psalm cxliv :—

‘Lord, what is man that thou hast such respect unto him :
 Or the son of man that thou so regardest him ?
 Man is like a thing of nought :
 His time passeth away like a shadow.’

It is easy to see how the parallelism aids the effect of the poem in all these instances. The corresponding lengths of the lines or sentences, with the natural pause at the end of each, give rest to the mind, while the repetition of the thought leaves it full time to produce its proper effect upon the feelings. The parallelism in the poetical books of the Bible is not always so simple or so clearly marked as in the examples given above. It is sometimes found in more complicated combinations, it is repeated more than once, or it occurs alternately, or in some other order. But no definite rules can be laid down, and in fact nothing is known on the subject beyond what the reader can observe for himself. Sometimes the parallelism becomes so indefinite that it is hard to say whether it exists at all or not ; it gradually fades away, and, as far as form is concerned, the poetry becomes ordinary prose.

II.

The Psalms in the Jewish and Christian Churches.

THE Book of Psalms is a collection of one hundred and fifty sacred poems. It was the Psalm-Book of the Jewish Temple, and is still used in the public and private devotions of the ancient people amongst whom it had its origin. The modern Jewish use of the Psalms is thus described by one of themselves:—‘The Psalms are embodied in every portion of our religious service,’ and ‘in private prayer in our family circle, when we rise up, and when we lie down; in all scenes of joy and sorrow; when we dedicate our house on entering it; when a family is seated around the table; when we hail the coming-in of the Sabbath, and as we watch the departure of the holy day; when life has left our loved ones, and we deposit their remains in their last resting-place, and when we place over that last home a slab recording their name, we read Psalms; for in that glorious book of poesy we find words appropriate to the occasion.’¹

The Christian use of the Psalms, both in the public offices of the Church and as a manual of private devotion, can be traced back to a very early date. It is

¹ *The Bible Reader for Jewish Schools*, by E. A. Davidson, pp. 345, 390.

probable that both uses were adopted from the Jewish Church from the very first. In the liturgies of the Greek and Roman Churches the Psalms are employed to the same extent as in that of the Church of England.

The general response which these devotional poems have met with from the hearts of so large a portion of mankind, through many ages, and in varying conditions of society, is a most remarkable fact in the history of the human mind, and is in itself no small evidence of the truth of Religion.

III.

Different Versions of the Psalms in the English Bible and in the Prayer-book of the Church of England.

To most English readers the Psalms are much better known in the Prayer-book Version than in that contained in the Bible. The Prayer-book Version is the older of the two, being the version of Cranmer's Great Bible, which was published in the year 1539. Cranmer's Bible was only an improved edition of Coverdale's Bible, a translation which had been made a few years before; and in Coverdale's Bible the Psalms were not translated directly from the Hebrew. They were taken from a Latin version of the Psalms which was in use in the Gallican Church, and is known as the Gallican Psalter. The version of the Psalms now contained in the Bible is part of the translation made 'out of the original sacred tongues' by order of James I. in the year 1610. It is more critically accurate than the Prayer-book Version, and may be sometimes found of use in ascertaining the true meaning of the Hebrew, when it is not correctly given in the other. But the Prayer-book Version has never been superseded by any later translation, either in the public services of the Church or in the hearts of the people. It is more rhythmical, and therefore better adapted for singing than the Bible translation. It is, moreover, now secured in its place by many old associations.

IV.

Origin of the Psalter.

IN the Prayer-book the Psalms are called the Psalms of David. This is a very ancient description of them; but we are not to infer from it that they were all written by 'the sweet Psalmist of Israel,' or that the collection was completed in his time. Some of the Psalms obviously belong to a date long subsequent to the reign of David, Psalm cxxxvii for example, which relates the sorrows of the people 'by the waters of Babylon.' Many are supposed to have been composed for use in the services of the Second Temple, and a few are placed by good scholars as late as the time of the Maccabees. It is possible that there may also be in the collection some Psalms, or at least some portions of Psalms, which are earlier than David's day. We cannot accept the heading of the ninetieth Psalm, which calls it a prayer of Moses, as proving its Mosaic authorship; but the Historical Books contain many specimens of poetical composition, some of which are evidently of great antiquity.¹ It is, no doubt, because the Hebrew Psalter owes its existence to the impulse which David gave to the practice of sacred song, and perhaps because some hymns actually composed by him formed the nucleus of the collection, that it bears his name. The superscrip-

¹ See Note A at the end of this volume.

tions in the Hebrew Bible, which ascribe seventy-three of them to him, cannot be relied on.¹ Many scholars are, however, agreed as to his authorship of a smaller number. It is not impossible that a collection of Psalms containing some of his composition may have been made for use in the service of the Tabernacle or of the Temple, and that this collection was the basis of our present Psalter, later additions having been made to it, and rearrangements of the whole having taken place from time to time. In the Book of Chronicles we are told that, when Hezekiah was rearranging the the services of the Temple, he 'commanded the Levites to sing praise unto the Lord with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer,'² which shows that at the time when that book was written some of the Psalms used in the Temple were ascribed to David.

The present collection is marked off into five divisions by doxologies, which occur at the end of each.³ These five divisions are sometimes called the Five Books of the Psalms.

¹ See Note B.

² 2 Chron. xxix. 30.

³ See Pss. xli. 13; lxviii. 35; lxxxix. 52; civ. 35; cl.

V.

Personal and National Elements in the
Psalms.

SOME of the Psalms are purely personal in their reference. They express the joys and sorrows, the struggles and aspirations, of the individual soul of the writer. Others have for their subject the fortunes and hopes of the Jewish community. But it is so natural for the personal and national elements to run together that it is impossible sharply to divide the Psalms into two classes in this respect, as it is in the case of any other classification which has been proposed. Psalm cii may be quoted as a beautiful instance of the intermingling of the individual and national sentiments. It is evidently written by a Jew of the Captivity in Babylon. Harassed and heartbroken the mourning exile pours forth the sorrows that oppress him. His life is passing away in pain and sorrow. He cannot live to see the restoration to Jerusalem, which seems even now close at hand. But he rests on the thought of God's Eternity and Faithfulness, and consoles himself with the hope that, after he is gone, the Lord will revive the fortunes of His people, and restore His worship, as of old :—

‘ My days are gone like a shadow :
And I am withered like grass.

But Thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever :
And Thy remembrance throughout all generations.

Thou shalt arise,
And have mercy upon Zion :

For it is time that thou have mercy upon her ;
Yea, the time is come.

For Thy servants think upon her stones :
And it pitieth them to see her in the dust.

The heathen shall fear Thy name, O Lord :
And all the kings of the earth Thy majesty ;

When the Lord shall build up Zion :
And when His glory shall appear.

.

The children of Thy servants shall continue :
And their seed shall stand fast in Thy sight.'

It is not often that the internal evidence of a Psalm points so clearly to the date and circumstances of the writer as in this case. But our uncertainty as to matters of this sort need not interfere with our devotional use of the Psalms. Whoever the writers were, whenever or wherever they lived, they were men of like passions with ourselves, contending with the same kind of trials and temptations that we have to contend with, and by the grace of God maintaining, with more or less of effort, their faith in the great Truths of Religion.

VI.

Faith Militant.

OCCASIONALLY we find the writers of the Psalms struggling with the same kind of difficulty as that with which the soul of Job was perplexed. The seventy-third Psalm states very distinctly the trial of faith arising from the apparent injustice of the distribution of happiness and prosperity in life :—

‘ My feet were almost gone :
My treadings had well nigh slipt.

And why ? I was grieved at the wicked :
I do also see the ungodly in such prosperity.

For they are in no peril of death :
But are lusty and strong.

They come in no misfortune like other folk :
Neither are they plagued like other men.

And this is the cause that pride is as a chain around their neck,
And cruelty encompasses them like a garment.

.

Lo, these are the ungodly,
These prosper in the world,
And these have riches in possession.

And I said,
Then have I cleansed my heart in vain,
And washed my hands in innocency.

All the day long have I been punished,
And chastened every morning.’

It is only when the mind of the Psalmist is calmed and elevated by communion with God that he can throw these doubts aside. Then he can understand the worthlessness of that prosperity that is 'without God in the world.' Then he sees that what the Almighty has to give to those who love Him is something better than the uncertain possessions of earth :—

' Then thought I to understand this :
But it was too hard for me.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God :
Then understood I the end of these men ;

Namely, how Thou dost set them in slippery places :
And castest them down, and destroyest them.

O how suddenly do they consume :
Perish, and come to a fearful end.

.

So foolish was I, and ignorant :
Even as it were a beast before Thee.

Nevertheless I am always by Thee :
For Thou hast holden me by my right hand.

Thou shalt guide me with Thy counsel :
And after that receive me with glory.

Whom have I in heaven but Thee :
And there is none upon earth that I desire in comparison of
Thee.

My flesh and my heart faileth :
But God is the strength of my heart,
And my portion for ever.'

This Psalm appears to be one of the few in which the writer arrives at the thought of a future existence as the

key to some of the mysteries of this life. In another Psalm in which the writer maintains, against the same appearances to the contrary that are stated in the seventy-third, that

‘A small thing that the righteous hath,
Is better than great riches of the ungodly,’

he seems to depend altogether on the certainty that goodness would ultimately meet with success in this life.¹ His conviction that righteousness would be ultimately justified in some way or another is not the less valuable to us, because we may not now expect to see the justification come about in exactly the way in which he expected.

¹ Ps. xxxvii.

VII.

Faith Triumphant and Unclouded.

IT would leave a wrong impression of the Psalms if we did not, after speaking of those in which faith appears contending with difficulties, recall to the mind of the reader how many there are of a different character. The hundredth Psalm, for instance, is a type of many in which all the enemies of faith are beaten down. They are trampled under foot in exulting triumph. They are as if they had never been :—

‘ O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands :
 Serve the Lord with gladness,
 And come before His presence with a song.

Be ye sure that the Lord He is God :
 It is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves ;
 We are His people, and the sheep of His pasture.

O go your way into His gates with thanksgiving,
 And into His courts with praise :
 Be thankful unto Him,
 And speak good of His Name.

For the Lord is gracious,
 His mercy is everlasting :
 And His truth endureth
 From generation to generation.’

In others, again, there is no thought or hint of any difficulty in believing. Such is the twenty-third Psalm,

in which, as in many others, the voice of faith is calm and clear, like the light of a summer evening :—

‘The Lord is my Shepherd :
Therefore can I lack nothing.’

Of such faith the one aspiration is that its sweetness may be shared everlastingly by all :—

‘O Israel,
Trust in the Lord :
From this time forth,
For evermore.’

VIII.

Unforgiving Spirit of some of the Psalms.

IT has been a sore puzzle to many persons that the writers of some of the Psalms should exhibit so much bitterness of feeling against their personal and national enemies. But we must remember that the writers of these Psalms were but men, and men belonging to an age in which the Christian law of forgiveness had not been preached. Is it any wonder that in their utterances, lofty and spiritual though they are in the main, we should occasionally find traces of imperfect human feeling? Would not the wonder really be if any such collection of human compositions were found to be quite free from imperfection? At the same time, before we pronounce final judgment on the utterances in question, we should consider carefully to what extent the feelings, to which exception has been taken, are to be condemned. Because it is one of the special glories of Christianity to have brought into due recognition the value of the milder virtues, there is a tendency in the minds of many persons to assume that they, and they alone, constitute the whole of goodness. But this is a great mistake. Zeal for right and indignation against wrong are also parts of the highest goodness, as they were of the character of Jesus Christ.¹ The man who

¹ See, for instance, Matt. xxiii. Compare John ii. 17.

fails in them fails as really and as badly as the man who fails in gentleness or in forgiveness of injuries. In judging therefore of the expressions which are used in the Psalms about enemies, we should bear in mind that righteous indignation against evil may have been a great part, if not all, of the feeling that dictated them; that the Psalmists may have had good reason for seeing in the enemies of Israel, or even of themselves, the enemies of God.

IX.

'By the Waters of Babylon.'

THE feelings with which some of the writers of the Psalms may have regarded the enemies of Irsael are well described in the following passage relating to the one hundred and thirty-seventh Psalm:—

'Even though we acknowledge that his words are too bitter and cruel, and are forced to condemn his prayers for revenge, we cannot but feel that it was not the worst kind of Jew who wrote this Psalm. Ignorant he may have been ; passionate and revengful, and perhaps even cruel, he was. These were the faults of his day, and of days long after his. But with all this there was something noble and touching in his grief—something of that living faith that saved in Babylon a remnant to return seventy years later. There were other Jews by the waters of Babylon more sordid and less passionate, who soon forgot their country's injuries, and lost their home-sickness for Zion ; who mingled with their heathen captors, ate their food, married their daughters, built houses, traded, and made homes ; easily consoling themselves in the present, and forgetting as quickly as possible the glories and misfortunes of the past. Quick-witted, worldly-wise, and soft-spoken men, who soon forgot the songs of Zion, and learned those of Babylon instead, and who accordingly

prospered in captivity, and, prospering, sunk into the stream of heathenism. For them Babylon was no place of penance, nor had Jerusalem a sacred meaning. They ceased to be God's people. It was only those "irreconcilables" who nursed still the love of their own land, and said in their impassioned grief, "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning; if I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth," who, when the time of deliverance came, had the courage and the faith to leave the riches and the pleasures of Babylon, to brave the long and dangerous journey, and to settle in a land for so many years forsaken, there to build up the holy city slowly and painfully amid the ridicule of their enemies, and to set up again the Temple, though so poor, so shorn of its ancient glory, so mean in comparison with that of days gone by, that even in the joy of consecration they could not but weep at the contrast.'¹

¹ See a Pamphlet on *The Vindictive Psalms*, by the Rev. Canon Sherlock, p. 42. (Dublin: Hodges & Smith.)

X.

Self-confidence of the Writers of the Psalms.

ANOTHER subject of perplexity to many Christian readers of the Psalms has been the strain of self-confidence in which so many of them are written, and which, in a few instances, rises to such a height that it can hardly escape the charge of self-righteousness.

It is not that a sense of sin is wanting in the Psalms. On the contrary, a few of them, the fifty-first Psalm for instance, exhibit as deep a consciousness of personal demerit and of the necessary imperfection of all human nature as can be found anywhere in the New Testament. The Psalms have in fact in a great measure supplied the Christian Church with the language of penitent devotion. The fifty-first Psalm has been described as 'that which, of all inspired compositions, has, with the one exception of the LORD'S Prayer, been repeated oftenest by the Christian Church.'¹ We cannot, therefore, say that the earlier religion did not, occasionally at least, produce as deep a sense of sin as that which Christianity has taught.

Neither can we explain the presence of this self-

¹ Neale and Littledale's *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. ii. p. 181. Compare, for example, the place which this Psalm occupies in the Communion Service of the Church of England.

confidence by supposing that it is the characteristic trait of one or a few of the writers, or that it was the peculiar mark of some one period in particular out of the long time over which we believe the composition of the Psalms to have extended, because, in a greater or less degree, it is to be found in a very large number of the Psalms, including some that apparently belong to different dates.

We must look for some other explanation, something that would have affected the writers more generally. Naturally we think first of the difference between the Jewish and the Christian systems, between the Law and the Gospel. And this, no doubt, had something to say to the matter. Those who were trained in a legal system, which, of necessity, tended to direct the thoughts more to the outward acts than to the dispositions of the mind, would be more ready to assert their own innocence, meaning by innocence their actual conformity with the expressed requirements of the law, than those would be who were trained in the principles of Christianity as they are laid down in the Sermon on the Mount. Perhaps, too, some of the confidence in self which we are considering is to be laid to the account of the Jewish national character. But there is one fact obvious upon the face of the Psalter itself, which is certainly connected with the tone of self-assertion that characterizes so large a proportion of its contents. It is the frequent mention that is made of individual or national enemies or rivals, with whom the writers of the Psalms compare themselves or their own people, and in contrast with whom they are continually assert-

ing their own integrity and godliness. From one Psalm it appears that this attitude of mind towards these opponents, whoever they were, was not of necessity inconsistent with humility before God, for it was the same servant of Jehovah that uttered the bitter complaint :—

‘ They that reward evil for good are against me :
Because I follow the thing that good is,’

who was also ready to say :—

‘ I will confess my wickedness :
And be sorry for my sin.’

And it was in the strength of this very confession that he was able to make the boast :—

‘ In Thee, O Lord, have I put my trust :
Thou shalt answer for me, O Lord, my God.’¹

But, on the other hand, it is only too evident that the feelings generated by such rivalry would naturally tend to occupy too large a share of the mind, and we are not able to deny that in the case of the writers of some of the Psalms they appear to have occasionally done so.

¹ Ps. xxxviii. 15, 18, 20.

XI.

The Enemies.

THE remarkable frequency of the mention of these enemies is one of the most striking features in the Book of Psalms, and it is evident that a consideration of it must enter largely into the explanation of three matters of which we have taken notice, namely, the perplexity of the Psalmists at the prosperity of the ungodly, and their imprecations upon their enemies, as well as their confident justification of themselves and their friends. Who were these enemies to whom such constant reference is made? To this question many answers have been given. Those who attributed all or most of the Psalms to David used to find the enemies and the ungodly chiefly in Saul and his adherents and in the later troublers of David's reign.¹ Those who have recognized the insufficiency of this view, and have seen that the composition of the Psalms must be assigned to many authors and to various dates, have had a wider field for their conjectures, and have endeavoured, with more appearance of success, to fit the different Psalms into their appropriate places in the history of the Jewish Religion. Here we can only direct the reader's attention to the fact that in the

¹ Even Ps. cxxxvii has been accepted as the writing of David, being supposed to have been written prophetically.

course of that history, as we know it, there may have been only too many occasions for such references to personal or national enemies as we find in the Psalter. In the many vicissitudes of that long struggle between the religious parties in Judah, which we have so briefly summarized in the chapter on the internal history of the southern kingdom,¹ in the occasional interference of foreign powers in that struggle, in the final catastrophe of the Babylonish Captivity with which we have already seen that more than one Psalm is distinctly connected, how many combinations of circumstances may there have been to give rise to complaints against bitter enemies or faithless friends, how many trying experiences, of which no other earthly record now remains, in peace or in war, at home or abroad, in the palaces of kings no less than in the unrecorded lives of private persons!² And four centuries later there took place in Judæa another religious contest, which was, if possible, more terrible and more exciting than any that had preceded it, when those who were loyal to the Jewish Law had to fight for their very existence against a powerful party amongst their own countrymen as well as against the combined hostility of the surrounding nations. In fact we may say that, though it may appear at first sight a strange thing that a Book of Devotion should contain so many compositions which bear the marks of human strife, the presence of these Psalms in the Psalter really corresponds in a most striking manner

¹ See *Introductory Hints to English Readers of the Old Testament*, ch. ix.

² Read, for example, the story of Jeremiah's life.

with what we know, from other sources, of the history of the Jewish Religion during most of the period within which the Psalms must have been composed.

In view of the exciting controversies and startling novelties of the present day, it may be no harm for us to be reminded of the struggles and vicissitudes through which the faith of the Jewish Church passed in the old times. They show us that Religion is not like a hot-house plant that is now for the first time exposed to the stormy blasts and varying temperature of the open air. It is true that from time to time the progress of thought may compel us to modify some of our opinions or beliefs. But the essential truths of religion will remain unchanged, even though the Church may have to clothe some of them in new forms. And in personal religion the same recollection may help us. If we meet with trial, the saints of old had their battles to fight too. If we sometimes fall away, if the good that is in us seems so poor and weak that it gives but little hope for the future, it is allowed us to remember that they passed through like experiences. They sometimes fell, and by the grace of God they rose again. They sinned, and were forgiven. They doubted, and their faith was re-established. And the same presence that was with them is with us. It can keep us as it kept them.

XII.

‘I will sing with the understanding also.’¹

THOUGH many questions connected with the history of the Psalter must of necessity remain in a state of greater or less uncertainty, it adds much interest to our use of it, when we can form some definite idea of the historical situation to which each Psalm may have originally referred, or of the position and circumstances of the writer. In most cases we can do this only in a general way, and even where the language of the Psalm seems to suggest well-defined particulars there may be much uncertainty as to the exact interpretation of its words. Still any idea, even a conjectural one, is a help to entering into the spirit of the poem. How much life do Psalms xliv and lxxix, for instance, derive from the supposition that they were written in the time of the Maccabees, a supposition which is supported by other considerations also²:—

‘O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance :
Thy holy Temple have they defiled,
And made Jerusalem a heap of stones.

The dead bodies of Thy servants have they given to be meat unto
the fowls of the air :

And the flesh of Thy saints unto the beasts of the land.

¹ 1 Cor. xiv. 15.

² Let the reader go over 1 Macc. i-v, and then take up these Psalms.

Their blood have they shed like water on every side of Jerusalem:
And there was no man to bury them.

We are become an open shame to our enemies:
A very scorn and derision unto them that are round about us.

.

And though all this be come upon us, yet do we not forget Thee:
Nor behave ourselves frowardly in Thy covenant:

Our heart is not turned back;
Neither our steps gone out of Thy way.

.

For Thy sake are we killed all the day long:
And are counted as sheep appointed to be slain.

Up, Lord, why sleepest Thou:
Awake, and be not absent from us for ever.

Wherefore hidest Thou Thy face:
And forgettest our misery and trouble.¹

Psalms xlvi–xlviii appear to have been composed on the occasion of some signal deliverance of Jerusalem, when the hosts of enemies had swept over the surrounding country, but had failed in their designs against the capital²:—

‘For lo, the kings of the earth:
Are gathered, and gone by together.

They marvelled to see such things:
They were astonished, and suddenly cast down.

Fear came there upon them, and sorrow:
As upon a woman in her travail.’

¹ Pss. lxxix. 1–4; and xlv. 18, 19, 22–24.

² Compare the account of the invasion in the days of Ahaz (Is. vii), or of that in the reign of Hezekiah (Is. xxxvi, xxxvii).

When the invaders poured like an angry flood around their walls, the besieged people drank in peace of the waters of Siloam, the stream whose waters 'go softly,'¹ and that typifies the satisfying of a deeper thirst:—

'The rivers of the flood thereof shall make glad the city of God :
The holy place of the tabernacle of the Most Highest.'

In one of these Psalms the words

'God is gone up with a merry noise :
And the Lord with the sound of the trump '

no doubt relate to some religious procession to the Temple, which formed part of the thanksgiving services of the rescued people, like that in which the Ark was first carried to the City of David on Mount Zion,² or that for which another Psalm was apparently composed:—

'Lift up your heads, O ye gates:
And be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors,
And the King of Glory shall come in.'³

There is a perplexing passage in Psalm lx, which occurs again in Psalm cviii, being perhaps in both cases quoted from some earlier composition:—

'God hath spoken in His holiness :
I will rejoice, therefore, and divide Sichem,
And mete out the valley of Succoth.

¹ Is. viii. 6. Comp. Gen. ii. 10 ; Ezek. xlvi, &c.

² 2 Sam. vi.

³ Ps. xxiv. 7.

Gilead is mine, and Manasses is mine :
Ephraim also is the strength of my head.

Judah is my lawgiver,
Moab is my wash-pot :

Over Edom will I cast out my shoe ;
Upon Philistia will I triumph.

Who will lead me into the strong city :
And who will bring me into Edom ?

Hast not Thou forsaken us, O God :
And wilt not Thou, O God, go forth with our hosts ?

O help us against the enemy :
For vain is the help of man.

Through God we shall do great acts :
And it is He that shall tread down our enemies.'

Here, whatever the particular circumstance of the case may have been, we have apparently the words of a king exulting in the secure possession of the Holy Land, and in the subjection, actual or prospective, of the neighbouring nations, but foiled for the moment by the resistance of an Edomite city, for the attack on which he invokes the Divine assistance. On both sides of the Jordan he was acknowledged master. He could partition the fertile vale of Shechem in the West and of Succoth in the East. The tribes of the North were with him ; so was Judah, the ruling power of the South. Moab was subject, like a slave compelled to perform menial offices. Edom should soon be reduced

to the like position, and the Philistines also would have to submit.¹

In Psalm lix, again, we meet with words which must have bewildered many a reader :—

‘ They go to and fro in the evening :
They grin like a dog, and run about through the city.’²

This is an example of a Psalm of which the exact reference is not quite clear, but in which some meaning, even an uncertain one, is better than none. The situation is thus interpreted by Ewald:—‘The poet is in the city (*i. e.* Jerusalem) beleaguered by heathen peoples (vers. 6, 14) who scoff at Jahve (ver. 8), who at the same time in rude arrogance, relying on groundless accusations, seek after his life. Already they have for several days more closely blockaded the city, in the night time especially holding stricter watch and thinking of attack and conquest, by day dispersing for plunder (comp. Is. xv. 1; xxi. 4).’ He supposes that the Psalm might have been written by the pious king Josiah during the Scythian invasions of Palestine. Psalm lv has been interpreted as describing a somewhat similar position : ‘The singer lives among foes in

¹ In Ps. lx. 8 the words ‘Philistia, be thou glad of me,’ a translation of a different reading from that in Ps. cviii, would mean that Philistia would gladly accept his rule; unless the words were intended to be understood ironically, as some commentators think that they were in the original.

² Ewald translates:—‘They howl like a dog, and run about (*i. e.* around the walls of) the city.’

a city whose walls they occupy with their patrols, exercising constant violence within the town, from which the Psalmist would gladly escape to the desert'¹:—

'O that I had wings like a dove :
For then would I flee away and be at rest.'

'The enemy is in alliance with one who had once been an associate of the Psalmist, and joined with him in the service of the sacred feasts'²:—

'For it is not an open enemy that hath done me this dishonour :
For then I could have borne it.

.

But it was even thou, my companion,
My guide, and mine own familiar friend.

We took sweet counsel together :
And walked in the house of God as friends.'

It is not unlikely that to many lovers of this Psalm the account here given of the writer's desire to flee away and be at rest will appear prosaic and poor in comparison with the meaning which they have been accustomed to find in his words. And here we may take occasion to observe that by calling to mind the fact that each Psalm must have had an original literal sense, we have no wish to displace or to disparage that rich collection of thoughts and feelings—sometimes higher thoughts and deeper feelings, which in the long

¹ Professor Robertson Smith.—*The Old Test. in the Jewish Church*, p. 203.

² *Ib.*

experience of the Jewish and Christian Churches have become associated with these old words and phrases, whether, according to the strict rules of logic, these later and fuller meanings were properly contained in the original words or not.¹

¹ 'I am persuaded that the Bible will always appear to us more beautiful the more it is understood—that is to say, the more we comprehend that every word in it which we take up in its universal significance and apply to our own case had always an immediate and peculiar application connected with the circumstances out of which it arose.'—GOETHE.

XIII.

Nature Psalms.

THE key to the meaning of many passages in the Psalms is to be found in the way in which the Almighty is commonly described as manifesting His presence in striking natural phenomena. The Hebrew poet expects his hearers to understand without any explanation that the lightning flash is the arrow of God's wrath, and the thunder the sound of his voice;¹ or, according to another figure, that the lightning is the devouring flame from His mouth, and the black thunder-cloud the smoke of His nostrils.² When the clouds gather upon the mountain-tops, or when the rain-mist steals along their sides, it is God's finger that has touched them and made them smoke.³ Though He decks Himself with light as with a garment, He makes His chambers within the black masses of the gathering rain-clouds.⁴ It is His splendour that gilds their edges with gold,⁵ His glory that flashes from the lightning, when on its errand of vengeance it leaps forth from His presence, rending the dark walls of His palace, and opening a way for the hailstones and the rain.⁶ In the

¹ Pss. xviii. 14; cxliv. 6; xxix. 3-5.

² Pss. xviii. 8; xxix. 7.

³ Pss. civ. 32; cxliv. 5; see also Ex. xix. 18, &c.

⁴ Ps. xviii. 11.

⁵ Ps. civ. 2; See Ex. xxiv. 9, 10, 15-18.

⁶ Ps. xviii. 12-14.

lowering sky that precedes the storm God comes down to visit the earth.¹ It is His presence that is felt when the thunder rolls, and the tempest sweeps along the sides of Lebanon, snapping the trunks of the cedar trees across, or bending them to the earth till they spring up again like living creatures, and when the solid mountain itself seems to quiver beneath the violence of the blast²:—

‘The voice of the Lord breaketh the cedar-trees :
Yea, the Lord breaketh the cedars of Libanus.

He maketh them also to skip like a calf :
Libanus also, and Sirion like a young unicorn.’

Possibly, however, we are to suppose that descriptions of the earth as moving, as shaking or trembling, as it is expressed elsewhere, may rather have been in allusion to the effect of an earthquake, a phenomenon with which we know that the Jews were acquainted.³ The smoking mountains at first thought suggest a volcano, but we have no knowledge of any volcanic eruption having taken place in the neighbourhood of Palestine in historic times, and the interpretation given above is probably the correct one.

There are many Psalms which show that the Hebrew poets were equally susceptible to the influence of nature in its milder aspects.⁴ But in none of these Psalms about nature is there any thought of confounding the

¹ Pss. xviii. 9; cxliv. 5.

² Pss. xxix. 5, 6; lxviii. 7, 8, 16; civ. 32; cxiv. 4, 6.

³ Ps. xviii. 7. See Exod. xix. 18; Ps. lxviii. 8; and Numb. xvi. 31; Amos i. 1; Zech. xiv. 5.

⁴ Pss. viii, xix, civ, cxlvii, cxlviii.

Creator with His works, as in the ancient nature-worship of some other nations.¹ If in the cloudy and dark day, when the windows of heaven are opened and the fountains of the great deep are broken up,

‘The Lord sitteth above the water-flood :
And the Lord remaineth a King for ever,’²

no less do the summer sun, and the orderly changes of the year, and the outspread landscape of hill and plain, and the smiling harvest fields speak to the Psalmists of Him and of His Law and of joyful gratitude to the Giver of all good! And in the clear night, when all is calm and still, and the sound of the strivings of the people is hushed, the same voice makes itself distinctly heard:—

‘When I consider Thy heavens, even the works of Thy fingers :
The moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained—

What is man, that Thou art mindful of him,
And the son of man, that Thou visitest him ?’³

¹ See Note C. See also a Sermon on *The Beauty of Nature a Revelation of God*, by Dr. John Dowden (Edinburgh: David Douglas).

² Ps. xxix. 9.

³ Ps. viii. 3, 4.

XIV.

The Psalter as a Modern Book of Devotion.

IT may be freely admitted that there are some disadvantages attending the use of the Hebrew Psalter as a modern book of devotion. In a collection of Psalms made so long ago under an earlier religious dispensation, and in a state of society differing in many respects from our own, it is to be expected that there should occur occasional passages that are obscure or unintelligible, and that some thoughts and expressions should be found which are in themselves unsuitable to the religion of the present day. But on the other hand there is a great counter-balancing gain in the use of a book with such historical associations as those of the Book of Psalms. It is a bond of union between our faith and the faith of other days, when we remember the origin of these words of prayer and praise which we can still use. Since they were first used many changes have taken place, the thoughts of men have widened, old ideas have passed away, and much new knowledge has been accepted. Our notions of duty, our standards of right and wrong, may not always be the notions and the standards of the age and country in which the Psalms were first produced. Our anticipations of the ways in which the providence of God will vindicate itself may not be in all respects the same as those of

the Psalmists appear to have been. But at heart we are one with them. Like them, we feel called to battle for right and truth. Like them, we know what it is to be wearied with the burden of sin. Still, as of old, the spirit of man leans for rest upon the Eternal and the Infinite, and finds in communion with God the satisfaction of its deepest wants. Thus, across the ages,

‘ Brother clasps the hand of brother,’

and thus, in the deepest and best sense, it is true that our faith and the faith of the fathers are one :—

‘ One the object of our journey,
One the Faith which never tires,
One the earnest looking forward,
One the Hope our God inspires.’

NOTES

NOTE A.

Poetical pieces, of greater or less antiquity, occur in the following passages:—Gen. iv. 23, 24: Ex. xv. 1-18, 21: Numb. vi. 24, 26; x. 35, 36; xxi. 14, 15, 17, 18, 27-30; xxiii. 18-24; xxiv. 3-9, 15-19: Deut. xxxii. 1-43; xxxiii: Josh. x. 12, 13: Judg. v: Ruth i. 16, 17: 1 Sam. ii. 1-10: 2 Sam. i. 19-27; iii. 33, 34; xxiii. 1-7.

NOTE B.

On the titles of the Psalms see *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, by Professor Robertson Smith, Lect. vii. An argument against the trustworthiness of these titles, of which the English reader can judge for himself, is the obvious inconsistency of some of them with the contents of the Psalms to which they are prefixed. Psalms cxxii and cxliv, for instance, are called Psalms of David, perhaps because David's name is mentioned in them, though both speak of David in the third person, and the former evidently belongs to a later date. Is it likely, again, that David should have composed Psalm lii against the mischievous devices of a lying tongue on the occasion to which the title assigns that Psalm, when, if we are to believe the account given in 1 Sam. xxi and xxii, it was his own false statement to Ahimelech of the object of his journey which led to the slaughter of eighty-five innocent persons? In other respects, too, the contents of this Psalm are inconsistent with its title.

It is evident that, once we admit that the titles are untrust-

worthy, we have no certain rule left by which we can determine the authorship. Ewald, on internal grounds, finds thirteen compositions of David in the Psalter. 'The result,' he says, 'of all my repeated investigations is that Psalms iii., iv., vii., viii., xi. (xv.), xviii., xix., xxiv. 1-6, xxiv. 7-10, xxix., xxxii., ci., of which Psalm xviii. also recurs in 2 Sam. xxii., actually bear on them the stamp of their derivation from David himself, and point in unmistakeable features to that greatest poet' (*Poets of the Old Testament*, Eng. Tran., vol. i., p. 65). He also includes in the Davidic Psalms the three in 2 Samuel, viz.:—i. 19-27, iii. 33, 34; xxiii. 1-7. Some scholars now doubt David's authorship of any of the Psalms. They are of opinion that the Psalms generally represent a later religious stand-point than that of the time of David or Solomon (see Kuenen's *Religion of Israel*, Eng. Tran., vol. i., p. 322).

Examples of Psalms most commonly supposed to belong to the Maccabæan period are Psalms xliv, lxxiv, lxxix.

NOTE C.

The reader may like to compare with the Psalms referred to in this section the following passage from a modern thinker:—'The theological argument for the existence of God has been demolished, it is said, by critical reason; so be it: but what reasons fail to prove, feeling which is equally of Divine origin may be bold to assert. Who can forbid us in the lightning and the thunder and the storm to fear the nearness of an Almighty Power? and in the fragrance of the flowers and the whisperings of the breeze, the loving approaches of a Being who lives in habitual communion with us.' Without stopping to inquire what Goethe means by the theological argument which he seems so ready to surrender, this passage may be taken as an interesting illustration of the fact that we in modern times may feel that God speaks to us through nature no less than He did to the Hebrew Psalmists, though our understanding of the processes by which nature works is so very different from what theirs was.

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